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ABSTRACT

The Fresh Start Program was an experiment in providing a comprehensive educational and therapeutic program for sexually abused and exploited adolescents. The program was based on the theory and practice of experiential, outdoor-challenge adventure education. The experiment involved 16 youth in a living and learning environment in the north woods of Wisconsin. The youth lived for a year in foster homes staffed by trained "teaching parents," and attended school staffed by special education teachers, teacher aides, and a clinical psychologist who also coordinated the adventure program. During the 180-day school year, the students and staff spent 45 days in adventurous trips that involved backpacking, canoeing, rock climbing, cave exploration, horsepacking, and dog sledding. These experiential trips to the wilderness were all less than 200 miles from the home-base school. The whole school staff accompanied the group on the adventure trips, and educational curriculum and therapy were integrated into each sequence. Evaluation showed that the youth made valuable gains in academic achievement, and improvements in both behavior and self-concept. Fresh Start was closed after 5 years of operation, mainly because it was very demanding on staff members and it was difficult to find qualified replacements. It was equally difficult to secure a replacement for the key team member who served as staff psychologist and coordinator of the adventure program. (TD)

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RC 020690

Chapter 13

AN EXPERIENTIAL ADVENTURE SCHOOL FOR SEXUALLY ABUSED ADOLESCENTS

Thomas E. Smith

Dr. Tom Smith, founder of the Raccoon Institute, is a retired psychologist and wilderness guide. He was formally educated at the University of Wisconsin, but he also studied for many years in what John Muir called "the University of the Wilderness." He has written four books (*Wilderness Beyond . . . Wilderness Within*; *The Theory and Practice of Challenge Education*; *Incidents of Challenge Education*; *The Challenge of Native American Traditions*).

In this chapter, Tom draws on his experiences as the Psychologist and Director of The Fresh Start School for sexually abused and exploited adolescents. The chapter is important because it describes a deliberate attempt to integrate home life, schooling, and psychotherapy for wounded young men and women who are not well served by piecemeal help. Tom gives considerable detail about the nature of the curriculum and therapeutic content. Out-of-school experiences and adventures lie at the heart of the joint educational and therapeutic work.

Throughout the 1980s, the challenge adventure methodology was the fastest growing variant of the experiential education movement. The roots of that methodology are complex, as it has drawn from a variety of professional orientations (Smith et al., 1992). Challenge adventure sequences have been offered for many different client populations, usually as part of a broader educational, therapeutic, rehabilitation, or training program. This paper summarizes a comprehensive education and therapy program for sexually abused and exploited adolescents which was designed with experiential challenge and adventure methodology as its core.

The Problem

The efforts of police and family service workers to crack down on perpetrators of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children have resulted in identification of numerous youths with special needs. For example, whenever police move in on a child prostitution ring or a child pornography movie producer, there are a number of young victims identified. By the mid-1980s, the state of Illinois had identified many adolescent boys and girls who had been victims of sexual abuse and/or exploitation. These youth had been "recovered" from the streets, or had been identified by criminal justice and family service investigations. They were victims of sexual abuse and had been sexually exploited by adults. They had emotional and behavioral problems, and a history of poor social adjustment. Most of them also had significant learning problems, and many had not been in school for 2–3 years. Few of them had any interaction with their biological family, and there was very limited possibility for any rehabilitation of family constellations. They needed to be placed in foster homes or supportive group homes as they grew toward adulthood. Most of the youth had also been involved with drugs and street crimes, and were "street smart" survivors in the urban environment.

Previous efforts to provide psychotherapeutic treatment and educational remediation had failed. Many of the youth had strong anti-school attitudes, and their trust in adults was extremely low. Some had a history of running away from foster homes, group

homes, and residential treatment centers. Most tended to be manipulative in interpersonal relationships. Some were depressed, and all had been diagnosed as having very low self-esteem. Most of the case workers, therapists, teachers, and previous caregivers who had been involved with these youth suggested that they do have potential for rehabilitation. They noted that the youth were of average or above intelligence, in good physical health, and capable of demonstrating pleasant personality and positive adjustment at times. While most workers agreed that the prognosis for readjustment was guarded, they still felt that these youth could be helped—**if they were given a fresh start in the right program.**

The problem, then, was to find some way to turn the page for these young people, to create a program which would provide such a fresh start.

Early Planning

An informal planning committee with representatives from the State Departments of Family Services, Mental Health, Criminal Justice, and Education set out to develop an experimental program for these youth. After soliciting the input of a number of field professionals, a plan, which was to become The Fresh Start Program, began to unfold. An early decision was for the youth to be placed in foster homes which were patterned after the "Teaching–Family Model" for improving family living and social adjustment skills. The original development of this behavioristic model was the work of Ellery and Elaine Phillips at the Achievement Place in Lawrence, Kansas (Levitt, 1981). Essentially, it involves training couples to be "teaching parents" for foster homes, learning to use an intensive, structured program of behavior modification to eliminate negative behaviors, followed by procedures to teach appropriate family interaction and social adjustment patterns.

It was also decided that the most appropriate location of these foster homes would be at some distance from the city, in hopes of reducing temptations to run away. Since the child service agency that could train and supervise the foster parents owned a camp in the northwoods of Wisconsin, two residential units would be

constructed there. Each of these homes was to be staffed by a married couple trained as the family teachers, and one additional adult to help with their program. One home would house a maximum of 8 boys, and the other, a maximum of 8 girls. This experimental population would range in age from 14-18, and would be multicultural. Placement in the program was to be of a full year's duration.

Two possibilities existed for providing the youth with an appropriate educational and therapeutic program. First, they could be sent to the local schools, working with available special education services to develop a remedial educational program, and counseling services could be contracted through the County Mental Health Center. Second, a comprehensive therapeutic school could be operated at the camp, providing a tailor-made program for the youth in residence. The planning committee decided that since the local school district and area mental health center, which would have the responsibility for serving the youth, had very limited resources, the more feasible option would be to develop a special school for both educational and therapeutic intervention at the camp setting.

Since previous programs, based on traditional patterns of educational and therapeutic intervention, had had very limited success with these youth, the planning committee suggested that alternative models be explored. As all of the youth to be assigned to the program would be considered eligible for special education placement, there was opportunity to plan for reduced class size and increased staffing. The school was therefore designed to have two certified special education teachers, two teacher aides, a full-time psychologist, and a part-time administrator. This would provide for a staff-student ratio of 2:5.

After considering a number of possible program designs, it was decided that the appropriate model would be the experiential, outdoor adventure alternative. With this choice in mind, the planning group contracted a clinical psychologist who was an advocate of the therapeutic potential of experiential methodology and who had an extensive practice in outdoor therapy. (*Author's note*: I was on my way to a new adventure. My role would be that of the psychologist for the school and psychotherapist for the youth, but I would

The Program Design

From the outset, there were two separate but related components to the total program. There were the family living homes staffed by the teaching parents and adjunctive staff, and there was The Fresh Start School which was responsible for providing education and therapy. An early description of the program noted these two components by describing the experimental project as a "living and learning therapeutic milieu."

The school program was developed with the outdoor adventure component as the core of the whole psychoeducational intervention. That program was designed to offer special off-campus adventure trips of 4–5 days' duration each month, and much of the school-based curriculum would be related to those trips. It was also expected that all of the school staff would accompany the group on all adventure trips. Still, it was obvious that a comprehensive school program would have to involve much more than the outdoor adventure trips. Specifically, there would have to be attention to three components of intervention: behavior management, academic curriculum, and therapeutic intervention, with experiential outdoor adventure as the core of the overall program.

The Behavior Management Program

An effective behavior management system is the priority starting point for any psychoeducational program dealing with youth who have behavior disorders and parallel learning problems. Only after symptoms are contained can meaningful academic instruction and therapeutic intervention unfold. The priority of starting with a meaningful behavior management program in an integrated program can be shown as in Figure 1.

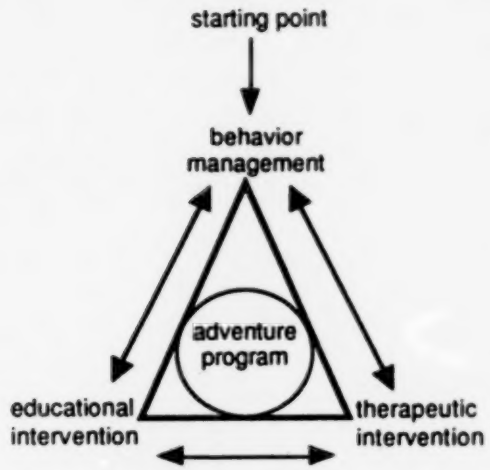

Figure 1. The three components of the program with adventure challenges at the core.

Recognizing the value of having *consistent behavior expectancies at both home and school,* The Fresh Start School developed a modification of the points-and-privileges system used by the family education home. That system also contributed to another desirable goal, that of *frequent communication between home and school.* The school management system provided for a "school note" which gave the teaching family a daily report on the student's behavior. In addition, there were periodic meetings between the teaching parents, the school staff, and the students themselves, focusing on the setting of individual behavior goals.

The Academic Program

The age and grade achievement range of the youth in the school was extreme, so instruction had to be highly individualized. As there were two teachers and two teacher-aides, individual and small-group instruction was provided as needed. Still, all the students were of high school age, so it was deemed important to have

them all earning regular high school credits which could transfer at a later date. The school staff therefore organized meetings with representatives from each student's home high school district to develop the Individualized Educational Program so that their course work would keep them on track toward graduation from high school. Course work was designed to satisfy the requirements of high school courses in mathematics, English, social studies, science, health, and physical education.

The curriculum units were developed with emphasis on the experiential learning model. There was to be a considerable variety of curriculum units of study that would make up the various courses offered, and examples are listed below:

- A curriculum unit on the geology of the state of Wisconsin, focusing on the period of glacial flow, was taught prior to an adventure trip that involved exploring caves in southwestern Wisconsin.
- The physical education curriculum included instruction in basic relaxation and breathing exercises, which were later facilitated by challenge education sequences and as part of group processing time.
- A basic mathematics curriculum was often presented by price shopping for food to take on the outdoor trips, and in the measurements required for baking and preparation of meals.
- A social studies unit focused on various patterns of physical, mental, and emotional disability, offered prior to a winter camping trip with a group that included people with disabilities.
- The English curriculum included vocabulary-building classes that emphasized "affect words" which could help the students better understand, reflect on, and express their inner feelings, confusions, and conflicts in group processing and group counseling sessions.
- The health program included experiential teaching of First Aid and C.P.R., and covered topics of preventive and interventive attention to problems of frostbite and hypothermia.

- Creative writing was taught by having the students keep journals when on adventure trips and field experiences, and then write stories when they were back at the school.
- A history unit on the logging industry included visiting a paper mill and a logging museum, and backpacking on trails in both virgin and new growth forest.
- A social studies unit on the Native American Indians involved a visit to a reservation, opportunity for sharing both interactional activities and discussion with Indian youth, and participating in a powwow where students learned drumming and dancing.

Some of the instruction at the camp-based school was more conventional, in that students used ability-appropriate workbooks in mathematics and English. There was also a program of 1:1 tutorial and remedial teaching for those students with academic deficiencies in math or reading. In addition, the staff developed a program of peer tutoring, which involved higher achievement students pairing with lower achievement students on partnership projects. This required that the higher achievers coach and assist the lower achievers. As often as possible, the teachers would offer instruction to the total group, and this was usually the case when there were hands-on learning experiences.

The Therapy Program

Like the academic program, the therapy program was designed to be related to the total living, learning, and adventuring environment of the youth. It was recognized that each student should have opportunity to resolve psychological conflicts through an intensive individual psychotherapy sequence, but it was also recognized that such an approach is not always productive for every person. The program for therapeutic intervention rested on the assumption that there is no single therapeutic method that is appropriate for all. Some adolescents will grow psychologically and socially with only a behavior management approach; others will not. Some youth will respond meaningfully to group processes or peer culture systems; others won't. Some youth, especially when basic trust in adults has

been shattered, will not respond well to the individual therapy sessions. From the beginning, the design of the program called for a multidimensional program of therapeutic intervention which paralleled the multidimensional educational program.

Eight different methodologies for therapeutic intervention were included in the total program. Each has a unique theoretical foundation. The eight avenues for therapeutic intervention have been described in a previous paper (Smith, 1987), and are shown as a multidimensional model in Figure 2.

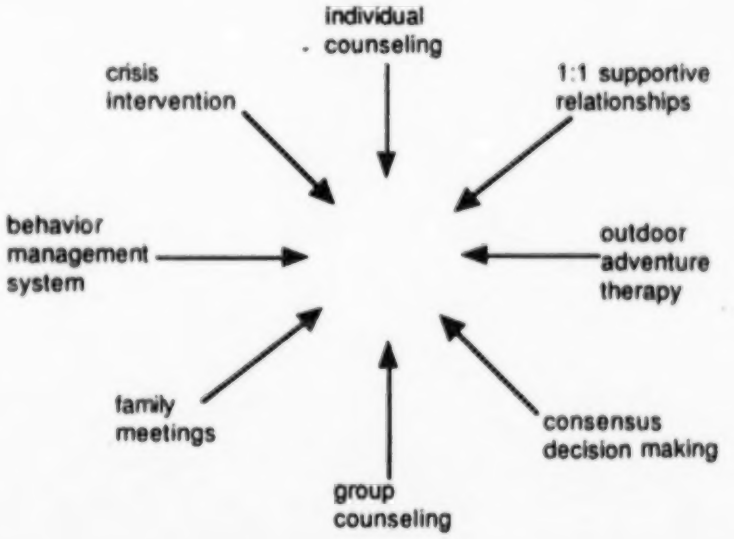

Figure 2. A multidimensional model for therapeutic intervention.

Individual Counseling. Many professionals have become aware of the limitations of the individual counseling model, especially with young persons who have cause to fear and distrust adults. Such counseling is often offered on a voluntary basis. At Fresh Start, individual time was set aside for each youth every week, hoping that he or she would use the developing trust with the therapist to really work through his or her problems.

Group Counseling. This is the second, most standard offering of therapeutic intervention. Over the past few years, counselors have

found the group methods to be most effective for some clients. At The Fresh Start School, there was a regular, weekly, counseling group session for the boys and another for the girls. Each of the classroom teachers served as co-therapist for one of the groups.

1:1 Supportive Relationships. The program recognized that a very special relationship could develop between any member of the school staff and a student. Historically, such a situation might be considered as "lay therapy" (counseling provided by an adult with less than complete professional training as a therapist). In order to maximize the therapeutic impact of such relationships, the program identified and encouraged them, even setting aside special time for the two people to interact. In addition, the psychologist met regularly with staff members who were doing this to provide consultation and support.

Daily Family Education Meetings. In the Family Education model for foster homes, there are daily family meetings facilitated by the teaching parents. While these meetings are basically designed to review the youth's progress toward family living and social adjustment goals, they often lead to clinically therapeutic interactions. As trust between the young person in placement and the family teacher builds, the family meetings become a place where members can discuss personal issues. In order to coordinate the therapeutic aspects of the family meetings with the total multidimensional therapy program, the Fresh Start psychologist met periodically with the teaching family parents.

Crisis Intervention Therapy. When the psychologist is available to assist other staff at times of a student's emotional or behavioral outburst, the whole situation can be turned to meaningful therapeutic growth. At Fresh Start, the psychologist would usually be on hand to help with any crisis situation and would always be available for a follow-up, 1:1 session with the youth to explore emotional learning.

Behavior Management as Therapy. Behavior modification enables the student to get continuing feedback on appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, and can lead to many personal growth gains. In addition, a good behavior management system enables the students to set individualized goals, allowing them to work out problems and patterns from their previous adjustment. At Fresh

Start, there was keen appreciation for the importance of the behavior management system as part of the total therapy program.

Consensus Decision-Making Groups. The program offered a special weekend privilege for all students who achieved their personal goals under the behavior management system. However, there was the additional requirement that the students would agree to, and organize, that special reward session. Using consensus decision-making, the youth had to talk over possible activities and deal with all the details, including timetable, need for special equipment or funds, transportation, and the appropriate behavior rules and consequences. The method requires that the appointed youth leader recognize all voices and guide the group to decision. Consensus cannot be bought or attained by threat, but must be arrived at by negotiation and appropriate attention to the wishes of others. Many peer conflicts develop and require the attention of the group in order to reach consensus. Any one person can block the planning of the others, and the group must then deal with that person's issues in order to move ahead.

Outdoor Adventure Therapy. The concept of outdoor therapy is perhaps the most unique aspect of The Fresh Start School's multidimensional, therapeutic intervention. Basically, the theoretical basis of outdoor therapy is that sequences of outdoor adventure, such as exploring the darkness of caves, climbing and rappelling on rock bluffs, cold weather camping, group initiative problems, and teams course activities can enhance awareness of self, others, and the self/other interdependency. The theory and practice of adventure therapy has become a recognized tool for work with troubled youth (Gass, 1992). For adolescents who have become detached from close interpersonal relationships, the outdoor-adventure group sequence tends to re-establish connections with others. When the staff responsible for the other dimensions of therapeutic intervention are also involved in the outdoor adventure program, trust relationships build so that the other components of the total therapy program can be more effective. Many barriers between psychologist and client are quickly reduced when that therapist holds the belay line for a youth scaling the walls of an 80-ft. cliff, or when they sleep next to each other on a tarp under the stars.

The Adventure Core

The challenge education model and the monthly adventure trips provided the core for the total educational and therapeutic program to unfold upon. An early differentiation among different domains of adventure supported the program's comprehensive approach. Four different types of adventure were distinguished: adventures outdoors, in the community, in the school, and in the psychological arena.

A distinction was made between outdoor adventure (hiking, camping, caving, and canoeing) and community adventure (service projects, visits to museums and historical sites, vocational education visits, for example). The adventure trips typically involved both the outdoor and community aspects. Adventure activities were not confined to trips; when the group was at home base, there was still school adventure (teams course, climbing on the water tower, and cross-country skiing, for example). Finally, the whole concept of adventure was used as a metaphor for the important introspective and therapeutic journey of each student—the psychological adventure.

The monthly 4- or 5-day trips away from the school provided a focal point for much of the rest of the program. Each trip followed the same pattern. Skills were progressively taught and practised. There was challenging travel in new terrain. Students met local people along the way and performed various acts of community service. Teachers gave daily lessons, relating academic content to the region being visited, and the psychologist maintained the therapeutic interventions with daily group sessions, crisis management, and debriefings after challenging events. Trips included both physical and social challenges. A brief outline of the content of each trip is given below.

September. A basic camping trip, teaching camping skills. There were hikes, tree climbs, environmental awareness sessions, and classes about wilderness survival.

October. A canoe trip, traveling wilderness waterways, and hiking into virgin timber forests. Along the way, the students met with loggers and forest rangers. The community service project was cleaning campsites at a state forest campground.

November. A backpacking trek along Ice Age trails, camping in handmade trailside shelters. Visits included a college geology museum and a reconstructed historical village; in parallel to the latter, the students interviewed elderly local residents.

December. A caving trip which involved sleeping in one cave and exploring two others. At the live-in cave, the group did a thorough clean-up. In the remote depths of one of the wild caves, there was a special psychological, introspective exercise.

January. A cross-country skiing, backpack trip traveling to the icy shores of Lake Superior. The group trekked to an abandoned iron ore mine, fished through the ice, tracked wildlife, and made large snow sculptures on the lakeshore. A highlight of the return trip was instruction at a pizza parlor, where the students baked their own pizzas.

February. A winter camping expedition to the Canadian border, with travel by dogsled, cross-country skis, and snowshoes. This trip paired the group with physically disabled campers. Students interviewed their traveling companions on the subject of their abilities, compensations, and attitudes. Sharing a special activity session with a group of foreign exchange students at Minnesota's Audubon Camp was a highlight.

March. A rock-climbing and rappelling trip. Through the school year, the group had experiences on the ropes course, the climbing tower, and various tree climbs. They were ready to move to actual rock bluffs. Along the way there were experiential visits to a taxidermist, a wilderness art studio, the emergency room of a hospital, a radio station, and a State ranger's fire tower.

April. A horsepacking trip through a National Forest. There had been pre-trip classes on horses, riding, and horsepacking. This trip also involved a very extensive service project of clearing unused riding trails in the forest. By the end of the trip, the students had cleared deadfalls and cut back brush along a 7-mile riding trail.

May. A wilderness waterway canoe trip, and whitewater rafting experience. This adventure provided opportunity for the group (by that time, quite experienced outdoor travelers) to share the excitement of the wilderness beyond and to maximize their own journeys to the wilderness within. A highlight of the journey was to camp near an Indian reservation, and to be guests at a special ceremony with Native American young people. An early morning sequence of

sun exercises beside a northwoods lake provided a fitting climax to the trip.

June. The final trip of the school year was a backpacking hike to a remote lakeside campsite. Students occupied solo campsites to spend time in reflection on the whole year and to record thoughts about the whole adventure. On the third night, the whole group gathered to share feelings, learnings, and therapeutic insights from the year's adventure—especially the psychological adventure.

In these sorts of ways, adventure programming provided a connecting thread and central core for the academic curriculum, the therapeutic interventions, and the behavioral management aspects of the program. The overall effect of these constituted the "fresh start."

Evaluation of the Program

The progress of the youth in placement at The Fresh Start School was assessed by a number of evaluation tools, with results as follows.

Academic Achievement

Two different academic achievement tests were administered to the students before they started the program and again at the end of the school year. Both the Wide Range Achievement Test and the Peabody Individual Achievement Test were individually administered. The entry data suggested that, while the average age and grade of the students was of 14.5-year-old high school freshmen, their academic achievement was only at the 4th- or 5th-grade level. Attitudes toward school and learning were quite negative, and the students were reluctant to risk academic output for fear of failure. In the early months of the program, the goals of the behavior management system were often in terms of basic behaviors necessary for learning in the classroom (e.g., listening, following instructions, staying on task, completing assignments).

As attitudes and behaviors which interfered with learning were modified, academic instruction could have more impact. Comparison of pre-program and post-program test results (Smith, 1992) showed that the students had made worthwhile academic gains in all areas of evaluation. The average of grade-level gain was 1.5, although some of the individual students had demonstrated almost three years of achievement performance. The data suggested that the academic program at Fresh Start School had been successful.

Behavioral Change

During the first few weeks that the youths were in placement, four different adults who had interaction with them filled out the Jesness Behavior Checklist (JBC). Usually the JBC was completed by two adults from the home placement (teaching parents or adjunctive staff) and two adults from the school program (teachers or teaching assistants). These four evaluations were averaged to provide a base-line behavioral profile for each student. During the last weeks of the school year, four adults again rated each youth.

The vectors of the JBC are scored from items that ask about observable behaviors, such as the tendency to interrupt, complain, or clown around, or tendencies to be angry, nervous/anxious, or withdrawn. A composite student profile was obtained by averaging the evaluations. The pre-post JBC profile of the average student at The Fresh Start School showed that, at the end of the school year, the students were more responsible, more considerate and trusting of others, more independent, better able to establish rapport with adults, better able to control anger, more enthusiastic about life, more relaxed and calm, and capable of some insight into their problems (Smith, 1992).

Self-Concept

There was also pre-post evaluation using the Tennessee Self-Concept Inventory. Again, the pre-post comparison of an average student profile showed that there were self-concept gains in three different areas. First, the students seemed to make gains in the area

of identity awareness. This implies more knowledge and awareness of themselves, their feelings, their conflicts, and their potentials. The counseling activities, both individual and group, as well as the sequences of challenging adventures, would be expected to contribute to this gain. Second, the data suggested that students made gains in their concept of themselves as physical beings. This makes sense, given the large amount of demanding physical activity in the program. Other things were also involved. All of the young people in the program had been victims of sexual abuse and exploitation, and tended to view their bodies negatively. As they learned to use their bodies in more productive ways, and even to share hugs with others, one would expect them to feel better about their physical beings. Third, there were changes in the student's social self-concept, which reflects feelings about one's perceived value to, and connectedness with, others. This finding matches the program's emphasis on interdependency, interactional trust, and positive social exchange. One student summarized this aspect of self-concept in her journal: "I feel so close to everybody here. This is my family—all of you are like brothers and sisters. I love you all, and I know that I am loved by you in return."

Conclusion

The Fresh Start Program was an experiment in providing a comprehensive educational and therapeutic program for sexually abused and exploited adolescents. The program was based on the theory and practice of experiential, outdoor-challenge adventure education. The experiment involved 16 youth in a living and learning environment in the northwoods of Wisconsin. The youth lived for a year in foster homes staffed by trained "teaching parents," and attended school staffed by special education teachers, teacher aides, and a clinical psychologist who also coordinated the adventure program.

During a 180-day school year, the students and staff spent 45 days in adventurous trips that involved backpacking, canoeing, rock climbing, cave exploration, horsepacking, and dog sledding. These experiential trips to the wilderness were all less than 200

miles from the home-base school. The whole school staff accompanied the group on the adventure trips, so educational curriculum and therapy were designed into the whole sequence.

How does one summarize and evaluate a program of such complexity and intensity? Evaluation of the youth showed valuable gains in academic achievement, and improvements in both behavior and self-concept. Still, no amount of quantitative data could really summarize the impact of the program. Perhaps the whole experience is best evoked in the words of two of the people involved.

At year's end, one of the teachers noted:

> I always loved the outdoors, and I have come to love being a teacher. Before I started at Fresh Start, I knew very little about experiential education. Now I have come to realize that it is the most powerful methodology available. I always thought I was quite involved with my students, but I have learned new depths of caring and sharing. There is no doubt in my mind that from now on I am going to be an outdoor experiential education advocate.

One of the students wrote in her journal:

> I'm worth something. I know that now. I used to think my life had been a waste, and that was what my future would be. I don't know where I'm going from here, but I know I'm on the road to making something good out of myself. Maybe that's how I would summarize what I've learned—I was nothing, and now I am something. I wonder if it is too much to say I know that I'm something special?

Fresh Start, despite apparent success and cost efficiency, was closed down after five years of operation. There were two major reasons for the closure, bearing in mind that the program was essentially a curricular and therapeutic experiment. First, Fresh Start was very demanding on staff members. In the fourth and fifth years, the strain began to take its toll and staff changes became necessary. It was hard to find certified, special education teachers willing to spend 5-6 days in every month in 24-hour-a-day program involvement on a sustained basis. At the same time, it proved very difficult to adequately replace the one person who served both functions of staff psychologist and coordinator of the adventure program.

Second, funding sources in Illinois began to question the need to move children to the northwoods of Wisconsin for placement and treatment. Could not a similar program be offered closer to home? The answer was "Yes, of course." A comparable integrated program emphasizing agricultural and vocational themes was subsequently opened in western Illinois.

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